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## THE USE OF THE SCRIPTURES IN THEOLOGY

Although prepared for a special occasion, and given before the Yale Divinity School, these lectures<sup>1</sup> were intended for and are admirably adapted to a larger audience. They are just what one would expect who has read the same author's *Outline of Christian Theology* and *Can I Believe in God the Father?* They will go far to correct false notions of the Bible, and to point out the true method of ascertaining and magnifying the eternal truth of God as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. The first lecture is given to the problem that has arisen by reason of the conflict between modern criticism and the old-time methods of treating all portions of the sacred volume as of equal value. Criticism, he declares, "is nothing but competent and candid examination;" and such honest examination finds in the Bible elements which are pre-Christian, and even un-Christian. He thinks that the New Testament has been disparaged by an undue exaltation of the Old.

The third chapter of Genesis has been more influential upon the doctrine of sin than all the words and attitude of Jesus. The book of Leviticus has done more to give form to the doctrine of salvation than any single book of the New Testament. The book of Daniel, with the Apocalypse, its companion in pre-Christian type, has influenced eschatology so profoundly that the opposing views of the fourth Gospel could not even be noticed. (P. 14.)

Accordingly, injurious consequences have resulted, and the author argues, in his second lecture, that the only clear, sound, self-evidencing principle in the construction of Christian theology is to determine the real Christian element in the Scriptures. To ascertain just what that element consists in is not so difficult as some may imagine. Christ is the great revealer of God, and his teachings about God and man, and the proper relation between the heavenly Father and the human child, are clear, unmistakable, fundamental, and essentially formative for Christian doctrine. Everything must be brought to this test, and in the main the result becomes as simple and authoritative as when Jesus sums up the whole law and the prophets in the two commandments of love. By the influence of the life and power of Jesus Christ men are brought into personal fellowship with God in just such life as Jesus lived. We must discern the Christian element by its intrinsic nature.

Not because it stands in some special place or bears some certifying mark may we call anything Christian, but only because it is what it is, and deserves

<sup>1</sup> *The Use of the Scriptures in Theology*. [The Nathaniel William Taylor Lectures for 1905, given before the Divinity School of Yale University.] By William Newton Clarke. New York: Scribner, 1905. viii + 170 pages.

the name. Evidence is to be in the thing itself, not in its locality or its label. (P. 64.)

The idea that this intrinsic witness of the spirit of Christ removes from us an objective standard of truth is met by a prompt denial. Rather do we in this way obtain our only true and trustworthy standard. That the Bible or the church is such a standard is disproved by the fact that radically conflicting systems of theology find their authority in the same external standard. Our leading question must therefore be, not, What is in the Bible? but, What is of Christ and like Christ? Christianity is not so small a thing as to require extraordinary search to find it. We should note that there is "the reality of large spiritual truth discernible by human powers divinely influenced" (p. 74). There is, in fact, no other way than by intelligent observation and judgment. But there must be spiritual vision. As deep calleth unto deep, so the spirit discerns that which is spiritual. "What is the proper function of a Christian man, if not to know a Christian truth when he sees it?" There is no presumption in declaring that Psalm 103 is Christian in its view of God, and that Psalm 109 is not Christian. Aside from all questions of rational criticism, there is the glorious body of living truth that Jesus has given us. It has its power in spirit and in life, and is no shadowy and elusive thing. So over and over again the author insists that the truly Christian element in the Scriptures and outside the Scriptures must be discerned by its intrinsic quality.

In all this, however, Dr. Clarke is farthest possible from ignoring the importance and value of the historical method in the use of the Scriptures. He "welcomes all worthy forms of study, historical, critical, devotional" (p. 83). His lectures give no special prominence to matters of critical research, but he emphasizes the necessity of passing frequent judgment upon the various contents of the biblical writings. We owe the construction of the canon to the godly judgment of those who were responsible for its formation. "It is because the Christian people judged what was Christian, and selected what was most Christian, that we have a New Testament at all" (p. 71). How many human judgments must have entered into a production of even a critical text of the New Testament like that of Westcott and Hort? All exegesis, all literary and historical criticism, and all work in biblical theology, is a work of human judgment. Furthermore, it is well to note that "new ideas never come into a vacant mind," and historical criticism must come in to help us determine what is old and what is new in our study of the New Testament. The process of critical separation is a work of time.

The synoptical gospels are not the precise transcript of Jesus' life that they were once thought to be; they embody the church's chief remembrances of him,

preserved in various ways, and nowhere attested as faultless remembrances. (P. 111.)

There is also the old and the new in the epistles of Paul. No apostle of Jesus should have been expected to expound the new revelation of Christ apart from language and conceptions long in common use. The second advent hope of the early church was, according to Dr. Clarke, a survival of Jewish expectations, mixed with the higher teachings of Jesus in regard to the glorious future of his spiritual kingdom which rose immeasurably above the notions of his time. So far from unsettling the intelligent Christian, this method of critical study turns his thought, first of all, to fundamental truths, and tends to establish him upon immovable foundations. Indeed, every lover of the Bible has been given to this kind of real criticism and analysis for himself.

Let the worn edges of any well-used Bible tell their own story. The four gospels, the Acts, most of the epistles, the finest of the Psalms, the latter part of Isaiah, passages here and there through the remainder of the book, differing in every case—these make up each one's personal edition of the Holy Scriptures. (P. 163.)

Thus the author clearly avows the necessity of employing a scientific historical method in expounding the Christian element in the biblical writings, and at the same time insists that the internal qualities of essential Christianity are to be spiritually discerned. Scientific criticism that is both devout and sane must needs be helpful in pointing out that which is permanent in the gospel.

The Scriptures are now being differentiated, so to speak, into their various layers of spiritual value and power. The criticism that is so distrusted is preparing for the hands of theology the real book, with the eternal light on its parts. When the passing and the permanent, the old and the new, the non-Christian and the Christian, have been well distinguished, theology will have the unmixed divine for its material. (P. 125.)

The last two lectures of the book are devoted to a statement of various positive and negative results which must follow a faithful application of this main principle. Much that has long been current in Christian doctrine must go into retirement, and the central truths of Christ's living message will stand forth in their own self-evidencing power and beauty. We believe the author's positions and arguments are in the main sound and irrefutable, and all should admit that "one who would rightly use the Scriptures for theology needs an interpreter's skill, a saint's insight, and a historian's judgment."

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